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# The Egyptian Military: Political Attitudes and Involvement

An Intelligence Assessment

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# The Egyptian Military: Political Attitudes and Involvement

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## An Intelligence Assessment

*Research for this report was completed  
on 12 December 1980.*

This paper was written by [redacted] Egypt–  
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Questions and comments are welcome and should  
be directed to the Chief, NESA Division, OPA, on  
[redacted]

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This paper has been coordinated with the Offices of  
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**The Egyptian Military:  
Political Attitudes  
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**Key Judgments**

The role of the military in Egyptian government and politics has declined during the presidency of Anwar Sadat. Nonetheless, the armed forces are the ultimate arbiter of power, and their continued support is vital for any Egyptian leader. As a result, the military's views must be weighed carefully in the formulation of policies affecting the interests of the armed forces.

President Sadat increasingly is being criticized by military personnel, primarily for his inability to relieve the hardships caused by continuing inflation. Unless he can alleviate economic grievances, this unhappiness probably will grow, and with it the potential for dissident political activity within the military.

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Support for the peace treaty with Israel is strong, for example, primarily because of general indifference toward the Palestinian cause.

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Nevertheless, the complaints over economic conditions and some other issues are eroding Sadat's credibility. Criticism is aimed more directly at the President now than in the past for allegedly mismanaging the Egyptian economy. Other sources of unhappiness include:

- The declining status of the military within Egyptian society.
- Reduced military privileges and more austere conditions of service.
- Vice President Mubarak's purported meddling in military affairs.
- Corruption at high levels within the government.
- The rivalry between the military and the civilian security services.

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President Sadat's reliance on the United States to modernize Egypt's aging arsenal is also a concern of the military. Some officers complain about the high prices charged by the United States and the long delivery times for US equipment, and worry that Israel continues to receive better treatment than Egypt. Such complaints are not major, however, and at least some senior military personnel appear to have gained a better understanding of the US foreign military sales process.

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The increasing level of US military activity is also a sensitive subject to many Egyptians, who have bitter memories of the earlier British and Soviet presence in Egypt. On the other hand, indications that US support for Egypt's military, economic, or political objectives was waning would be a serious setback for Sadat.

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Government leaders are aware of the armed forces' concerns and problems and realize the need to retain its allegiance. Their options for dealing with these complaints are limited, particularly their willingness to stem inflation through austerity measures, but the government could provide short-term relief by increasing pay and other military benefits. A positive development in the foreign policy field also could slow but is unlikely to halt the decline in Sadat's prestige.

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## The Egyptian Military: Political Attitudes and Involvement

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### **Background**

The stability that has characterized modern Egyptian politics stands in sharp contrast to the post-independence situations in other key Arab states such as Iraq and Syria. Egypt has had but four leaders in the past half-century. All three changes of regime were accomplished without bloodshed, including the removal of King Faruq by Nasir and the Free Officers in 1952.

Egypt's military is the only institution in the country that can overthrow the regime. Conversely, and equally important, the armed forces can keep a regime in power against any combination of existing opposition groups. The military has a long history of loyalty to the presidency in spite of the stresses brought about by such events as Egypt's costly involvement in the Yemen civil war in the early 1960s and the military defeats by Israel in 1956 and 1967. The military still is the most disciplined institution in the country, despite the recent increase in discontent among military personnel.

The President is the supreme commander of the Egyptian armed forces. The Minister of Defense is commander in chief of the armed forces and exercises control through the armed forces' chief of staff and the commanders of the Navy, Air Force, and Air Defense Command. The armed forces' chief of staff, who also commands the Army, exercises day-to-day control over all services. The respective heads of these services, however, have direct access to the Minister of Defense as particular service interests require.

### **Role of the Military in Decisionmaking**

During the Nasir era the role of the military in government was clearly evident. For example, from 30 to 66 percent of the members of Nasir's cabinets had military backgrounds. During his years in office, Anwar Sadat also has relied heavily on the military to sustain his position. In May 1971 Sadat was careful to gain the support of key commanders before eliminating a group

of powerful rivals. Additionally, military leaders appear to have played an important role in the decision to end the Soviet military presence in Egypt in July 1972.

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The military's role in government has declined in recent years. The current cabinet of 27 individuals, excluding Sadat as Prime Minister, contains only three professional military officers.

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Nonetheless, the military is the ultimate arbiter of power in Egypt, and its interests cannot be ignored by Sadat or other government leaders. Sadat's attitude toward the armed forces reflects a respect for its potential as a force for political change. Sadat, like ~~Qaddafi~~, promised to allow the military to participate in government-sponsored political organizations, but has not fulfilled that promise, apparently fearing the politicization of the most powerful institution in the country. Sadat's efforts to modernize Egypt's aging military machine through the acquisition of sophisticated equipment from the United States and other friendly states are presumably motivated in part by the need to assure the political loyalty of the armed forces.

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The influence of the armed forces extends beyond the area of military equipment acquisition. Egypt's current Foreign Minister, Kamal Hasan Ali, is a career army officer who represents the views of the military in the government. Following his appointment to that post in mid-1980, Ali moved quickly to put his own people in key positions in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Many of the new appointees were recently retired military personnel. Career Foreign Ministry officials reportedly

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have mixed feelings about this development. Some believe that Egypt's international position could be improved if foreign policy specialists, rather than military officers such as Ali and Vice President Mubarak, were Sadat's principal foreign affairs advisers. Others hope that through his military ties Ali will revitalize the Foreign Ministry and make it a more effective arm of government.

Sadat is the primary policymaker in Egypt, but must consider the views of the Egyptian military when policy is being formulated. Sadat and other senior officials are deeply concerned about Soviet and Cuban involvement in the Middle East and Africa and stress the need to counter this threat, with military force if necessary. Many Egyptian military officers, particularly at the middle and junior levels, do not share their superiors' concerns and could be expected to complain if significant numbers of Egyptian troops were committed abroad to counter Soviet designs.

Officers, enlisted men, and civilians welcomed the peace treaty with Israel because it reduced the chances of another costly war. They now expect the government to concentrate on alleviating economic hardships and do not want a repeat of Egypt's disastrous involvement in the civil war of the 1960s in North Yemen. Although the military would probably obey if ordered to deploy abroad, it manifests an "Egypt first" attitude that admits little tolerance for expending men and scarce resources in foreign conflicts not directly threatening to Egypt. Sadat has provided limited amounts of military aid to several African states, but this modest effort has involved no Egyptian combat forces, thus drawing no serious objections from military personnel.

Despite Libya's aggressive posture toward Egypt, many Egyptians oppose military action against Libya. Senior military officers have urged caution because of a general unreadiness to sustain combat operations, because they fear Libya's ability to inflict losses on Egypt, and because of opposition to the idea of fighting a fellow Arab state. A protracted war with Libya that resulted in significant casualties or that was widely perceived as a policy failure for Sadat would probably produce significant discontent and perhaps organized dissent within the military. Although hard evidence is

lacking, the military's attitude probably is one of the factors that deterred Sadat from taking forceful action against Libya in the three years since the border conflict of 1977.

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#### Attitudes Toward Sadat

The armed forces appear to be basically loyal to Sadat, but his standing among military personnel has slipped over the past several months. Rapid inflation and other economic problems have led to increasing criticism among military personnel and civilians alike. The monthlong ban on meat sales that Sadat announced on 1 September 1980 had a particularly deleterious effect on attitudes within the military. Complaints about the economy have become more intense, and some are aimed directly at Sadat.

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Inflation of 30 percent a year is expected to continue in 1981 and probably will cause further unhappiness among military personnel as well as civilians.

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The military's respect for Sadat is being diminished by other factors as well.

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The President's economic liberalization program doubtless has contributed to the problem by allowing the gap between rich and poor to widen. The bitterness of some in the military over the increasingly ostentatious spending habits of the privileged few and the hardships of those who live on government salaries was highlighted

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On the positive side, the Egyptian armed forces, like virtually all civilians, support Sadat's efforts to pursue peace with Israel and arrange a comprehensive settle-

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ment of the Arab-Israeli dispute. Weary of decades of hostility with Israel, military personnel believe that Egypt has done more than its share for Palestinian and pan-Arab causes. The peace treaty with Israel, moreover, carried with it the promise of an improved economy and the prospect that the United States would become a major supplier of arms to Egypt, thus halting the deterioration of the country's military strength and helping to ensure that it remains a major Middle East power. Egyptians continue to support the peace with Israel despite what is perceived as Israeli intransigence in the West Bank-Gaza autonomy talks. Egypt's isolation from the other Arab countries as a result of the peace treaty remains a nagging but manageable concern.

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#### Vice President Mubarak's Position

Vice President Husni Mubarak, a former commander of the Egyptian Air Force, is the most influential military figure in government after President Sadat. Over the past few years Mubarak has played an active role in Egyptian domestic politics and has strengthened his position by arranging for the appointment of close associates to key government posts. He also maintains a strong voice in the running of Egypt's military, particularly the Air Force. Mubarak apparently involves himself in most senior officer assignments

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#### Other Military Complaints

The rivalry between the military and the security services represents another problem for Sadat. Armed forces officers hold the security forces in low esteem. Some have come to believe, moreover, that Sadat is increasing the influence and size of the police and security forces at the expense of the military to create an alternative power base. A few officers buttress the charge by claiming that the police are getting equipment that rightfully belongs to the armed forces.

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Since the food riots in January 1977, both the national police and the paramilitary Central Security Force have been upgraded and enlarged. These efforts are intended to enhance the government's ability to deal with civil disorder. Elements within the military trust the government's intentions, however, and this could hamper cooperation between civilian security forces and the armed forces during a serious breakdown of public order.

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The military traditionally has been regarded as an internal security force of last resort. During the riots of January 1977 military units brought the situation under control when the police failed to do so. During periods of civil unrest, therefore, the attitude of the armed forces will be of critical importance. Should popular protest center on economic problems of equal concern to military personnel like inflation and inadequate housing, the armed forces probably will have considerable sympathy for the demonstrators, thus hampering the effectiveness of military efforts to restore order. The possibility might arise of military personnel joining popular demonstrations against the government.

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A recurrent and worrisome complaint within the armed forces centers on the erosion of military prestige within Egyptian society. The primary military threat to Egypt was largely eliminated upon the conclusion of the peace treaty with Israel in March 1979. Since then, the public's attention has shifted from Egypt's military needs toward economic problems. Military officers believe that members of the newly prosperous middle class are more respected than armed forces personnel who have devoted their entire lives to the defense of their country. They further note that officers no longer are considered a "good catch" by Egyptian women from good families.

within the Egyptian armed forces were high, and as the limitations on the US military aid program became clear, disappointments inevitably appeared. In early 1980 senior military officers were complaining that US arms offers were inadequate and that delivery schedules were not rapid enough. Air Force officers charged that Israel continued to receive better treatment than Egypt. They grumbled, for example, that the United States had agreed to supply only limited numbers of F-16 aircraft despite Egypt's need for many more, and that delivery of these aircraft would not begin until late 1981. Such complaints continue, but do not seem to have seriously undermined the generally favorable view within the Egyptian armed forces of the US military supply relationship.

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Egypt's extensive requests for US military equipment are to a large extent the product of a real need to replace and refurbish aging Soviet equipment. Political factors are important as well, including the need to maintain high morale and thus ensure the loyalty of the military, and to demonstrate that Egypt's alliance with the United States is paying dividends. Egypt's request for F-15 aircraft was a case in point. Washington's agreement in principle to supply this aircraft was an important political symbol, signaling that Egypt was receiving treatment from the United States comparable to Israel's.

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The increasing level of US military activity in Egypt, however, could lead to serious domestic problems for Sadat. Egyptians are highly sensitive to the presence of foreign forces on their soil as a result of bitter experiences with the British occupation beginning in the late 19th century and later with the Soviet presence that at one time numbered 16,000 military advisers, technicians, and combat personnel. The growth of Arab nationalism and the increased superpower involvement in the region have reinforced Egypt's determination to guard its sovereignty.

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If the level of US military activity in Egypt is carefully managed, it will not cause serious problems for Sadat despite vocal criticism by opposition groups on the right and left. The temporary deployment of US aircraft to Egypt this summer apparently reassured those Egyptians who fear that the United States will estab-

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### **The US Factor**

Once the only major military power in the Arab world, Egypt has seen its position eroded by the virtual cutoff of Soviet military assistance in 1975. The loss of Arab financial aid as a result of the peace treaty with Israel in 1979 also hurt Egypt's efforts to obtain needed military hardware. Currently, Cairo is looking to the West, particularly the United States, for help with its military programs. It also is obtaining some military equipment from such Communist countries as China, North Korea, Romania, and Yugoslavia.

Egypt's military needs are enormous and are not likely to be met fully by any combination of sources in the near term. The process of modernizing the Egyptian armed forces is likely to be prolonged, raising the danger of a further decline in military morale. This factor will continue to impel the government to press friendly states such as the United States for speedy delivery of modern military hardware.

Egyptians at all levels viewed an expanded US economic and military assistance program as one of the promised benefits of peace with Israel. Expectations

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lish permanent military bases in their country. Over time and as the use of Egyptian facilities increases, however, this issue could become a more pressing domestic problem for Sadat unless such activity is compatible with Egyptian objectives and provides tangible benefits to the Egyptian armed forces. [redacted]

Any significant downturn in Egypt's relations with the United States, on the other hand, also would be a serious setback for Sadat. In particular, indications that the US commitment to supply military hardware was weakening would generate strong military criticism of Sadat for relying too heavily on the United States. Pressures would increase for a return to the Arab fold so that Egypt's military needs might be met through aid from moderate Arab states. [redacted]

#### **Attempts To Suborn the Military**

Despite the range of problems troubling military personnel, the complaints apparently are diffuse, and there has been no firm evidence of organized disidence within the armed forces over the past several years.

Opponents of the Sadat regime abroad continue trying to suborn Egyptian military personnel, but their efforts apparently have been only marginally successful, and there is little evidence to suggest that a foreign-inspired military revolt is possible in the near term.

Libya has long tried to win the allegiance of Egyptian armed forces personnel. [redacted]

The presence of Soviet military and intelligence advisers in Egypt gave the Soviet Union opportunities to recruit agents, and many members of the Egyptian armed forces received training in the Soviet Union. Most Egyptians developed a lasting dislike of the Soviets, but Moscow probably has some assets among [redacted] military personnel. We suspect that Soviet influence is nominal, however, and see no possibility of a Soviet-engineered military move against Sadat. [redacted] 25X1

#### **Government Efforts To Combat Military Complaints**

Government officials, including Sadat, are acutely aware of the need to keep the allegiance of the Egyptian armed forces and to forestall the development of organized opposition groups among military personnel. To that end, the Directorate of Military Intelligence [redacted] and Egypt's other security services watch closely for indications of dissident activity within the armed forces. [redacted]

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In the past the Egyptian officer corps was carefully cultivated and in some ways the most privileged class in Egyptian society. This no longer appears to be the case, but military officers still receive preferential treatment in some areas. During religious holidays [redacted] in October 1980, for example, lamb was sold to officers at 30 percent below the normal government-controlled price. Such reduced prices apparently are available to the officer corps on a regular basis. [redacted] 25X1

In an attempt to counter increasing military complaints about inflation and other economic problems, Minister of Defense Badawi in September 1980 began a speaking campaign among military units intended to convince officers of the benefits of military service. Badawi emphasized the privileges available to military personnel, such as health care, and claimed that when these were taken into consideration, officers received higher salaries than their civilian counterparts in government. Although the results of Badawi's efforts are not known, such official attention to military complaints may help defuse the spreading concern [redacted] 25X1 economic conditions [redacted] 25X1 25X1

Other methods of dealing with the deterioration in military morale are being tried as well. Air Force leaders reportedly are attempting to boost morale

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through increased training.



Cairo has shown keen interest in developing other ties with NATO countries. In a similar vein, Egyptian officials have repeatedly emphasized the equality of the partnership with the United States and the fact that the military facilities offered to the United States are not bases, but are for use in the event that a fellow Arab country requests external assistance.



#### **Outlook**

In the months ahead Sadat is likely to be increasingly on the defensive to preserve his standing with the Egyptian armed forces. A further deterioration in military morale, and consequently in Sadat's credibility, appears inevitable if the military are not persuaded that the government can address the inflation issue and other economic grievances. Egyptians believe that the government is directly responsible for their welfare and expect inflation to be eased without onerous austerity measures. Sadat, therefore, probably will have to continue to rely on stopgap measures designed to ease the burden of past inflation as well as resort to further high-level personnel shifts in the economic sector.



If popular discontent worsens, perhaps because of a government misstep on consumer subsidies or the supply of basic commodities, serious civil disorders could result. Should such unrest persist and spread, the government probably would need to call on the military to restore order. This would provide an important test of the depth of military disaffection. In a worst case scenario, and if Sadat's credibility had eroded further, the armed forces might intervene and replace Sadat with a military officer.

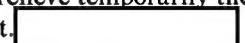


There is no evidence that such events are imminent, however, and in the past Egyptians have demonstrated their ability to tolerate hardships without resorting to precipitate action. A positive development in Egypt's foreign policy, moreover, could reduce or halt the decline in Sadat's prestige. Even a limited rapprochement with Arab moderates such as Saudi Arabia, for example, would be popular and could rekindle hopes that Arab aid might allow Egypt to accelerate military programs and further boost economic development. A breakthrough in the West Bank-Gaza autonomy talks, particularly one engineered by the United States, also would tend to improve morale and underscore the benefits of Egypt's relationship with the United States.



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Even without such dramatic developments, Sadat is capable of imaginative actions to preserve his position. If he perceived malaise within the armed forces reaching a dangerous level, he could announce pay raises or improve benefits to relieve temporarily the economic sources of discontent.



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